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Also by John Muckle

*It Is Now As It Was Then* (with Ian Davidson)
The Cresta Run
Bikers (with Bill Griffiths)
Cyclomotors
Firewriting and Other Poems
London Brakes
My Pale Tulip
Little White Bull

British Fiction in the Fifties and Sixties

John Muckle

Shearsman Books
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Introduction

I

RAYMOND WILLIAMS, ‘REPRESENTATION’ AND BRITISH FICTION

It may seem odd to call a study of the British novel in the fifties and sixties after a Tin Pan Alley song. ‘Little White Bull’ is from a forgotten musical comedy featuring a once-popular cockney skiffle singer—a toothy little chap who made hay for a few years as a family entertainer before being enshrined forever in the early history of British rock’n’roll. It was a song often heard on the radio when I was a small boy. Tommy Steele was a star back then, and ‘Little White Bull’, written by prolific East End Jewish composer Lionel Bart, is a song that would probably be remembered by anyone who grew up in Britain in the fifties and sixties. This maddening ditty, and its central image of the cockney ‘little white bull’, became part of a popular memory and of that nebulous, fleeting, ghostly creature once known as ‘working-class culture’, largely due to its having been inflicted on radio listeners thousands of times. It is a chirpy, hopeful song. The little white bull of the working-class, represented by a young cockney sailor on shore leave in Spain, is determined to show he is just as good as the big black bulls—those arrogant bullying giants bred specifically for combat in the arena of middle-class power, who always seem to believe their pre-eminence has been divinely or genetically ordained.

On the face of it this is a hopeful song about social class, or being an outsider, in tone somewhat reminiscent of Danny Kaye’s performance of ‘The Ugly Duckling’ in another Saturday afternoon favourite. Maybe not. It might well be that the black bulls refer to the African-American boxers who had come to dominate the sport of gentlemen by this time, and Tommy, the brave little white bull, is an East End fighter in the not yet lost cause of white supremacy. Either way, he is just as good as any of them, or so his mother believes, and Tommy the Toreador sets out to prove his point: the funny little man (just like Charlie Chaplin, George Formby or Norman Wisdom before him) can and will triumph over the snobs with his combination of unstoppable charm, necessary cunning, and, in Tommy’s case, sheer persistence and bravery. It was never easier than in these films to buck the ‘little white rule’ that holds class society together and puts people like us in our place. Ah, dreams. Tommy the Toreador had another song about the power of the imagination to vanquish reality, and in the magnificent opening sequence of Cliff Richard’s second feature, The
Young Ones, we are again told that nothing is impossible. Cliff and his amazed girlfriend walk up walls, fly over fences, and he effortlessly bends the iron railings that surround the park like so much rubber in order that they may slip through them to joy. Cliff croons to her about all the fools who have scoffed at progress, citing among other indicators the invention of penicillin and the recent achievement of Major Gagarin in conquering space: now the city of London, the world—and the universe itself—is to be the raw brimming oyster of this oh so lucky generation. If only we had kept dreaming.

The story of this strand of postwar British fiction is in large part the story of what happened to those preposterous hopes, retold by someone who for a time believed that the lyrics of ‘The Young Ones’ and Cliff’s other early songs, as well as those of Adam Faith, Billy Fury and others, actually foretold his own future: ‘If there is hope, it lies in the proles,’ George Orwell had feebly intoned in 1948, and Cliff and Tommy, Joe Brown and Billy Fury were proof positive that young working-class people weren’t going to be satisfied forever by bombsites, the cold war and Victory gin. But if this study is only a storybook, and in that sense a fairytale, it will have failed. The hopes and social aspirations contained in those early films and songs were after all only the sugar frostings of a time when, in Britain’s literary and political culture, definitions of social class, the position of women, race and empire, sexuality and family life, were being fiercely contested across the board. For every vaulting utopian (and these were more likely to be found in advertising and pop music than in serious culture) there was a bevy of nay-sayers who might have been less wholesomely comely than the Beverley Sisters, but often had their fingers more firmly on the pulse of what was actually happening in British society in the Larry Parnes years, and were certainly better versed in the conceptions that it had inherited. The big questions that underlay all the fizz and all the anguish of postwar culture were framed by the generation who had fought the Second World War, later by those who had grown up during it and came of age in the sixties and were to be personally affected by how society was changing to accommodate the higher aspirations of the working-classes. This period, roughly from 1950 to 1970, was intensely preoccupied with questions of social class, social mobility, the meaning of democracy and ‘mass society’ in a way that no other had quite been before or has since. Furthermore, I believe that it is in fiction more than in popular music, film or any other cultural carrier that the most telling records of this social paroxysm are to be found, and I also believe that the whole period needs to be looked at again and better understood. The strange thing is that in that happy moment when Tommy became a Matador and Cliff ran up a wall and bent the rubber railings, you can always find some book, written by someone,
qualified or not, which claims to define the condition and what are seen to this day to be the key problems of the British working-classes.

In his conclusion to Culture and Society influential critic and novelist Raymond Williams attempted to come up with an inclusive definition of ‘working-class culture’, to pin down its palpitating essence under smoky glass: ‘It is not proletarian art,’ he wrote, ‘or council houses, or a particular use of language; it is, rather, the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions that proceed from that.’¹ The real cultural achievement of the working-class, he explained, was the labour movement and the Labour Party: expressions of a co-operative idea or spirit that Williams contrasted with the spirit of competitive individualism in its crudest form, and which he is careful to distinguish from the Victorian middle-class ideal of public service, and its related notion of equality of opportunity, for which he has somewhat more respect. He contrasts his own point of view, or rather that of his Welsh railwayman father, an active trades unionist, with that of the middle class of civil servants, administrators and teachers as respectively the views of lower and upper servants. Equality of opportunity as a social nostrum originates, he says, in an ideal of Victorian philanthropists he calls ‘the ladder’, and it is ‘of course based on the desire to become unequal.’ Equality of opportunity and meritocracy were vaunted social ideals of postwar British politics, but Williams dismisses them both as distorting, delusory and, above all, socially divisive:

Judged in each particular case, it seems obviously right that a working man, or the child of a working-class family should be enabled to fit himself for a different kind of work, corresponding to his ability. Because of this, the ladder version of society is objectionable in two related aspects: first, that is weakens the idea of common betterment, which ought to be an absolute value; second, that it sweetens the poison of hierarchy, in particular by offering the hierarchy of merit as a thing different in kind from the hierarchy of money or of birth.²

‘The ladder,’ he argues, ‘is merely an image of a particular version of society’ and as such is a substitute for ‘the making of a common educational provision; to the work for equity in material distribution; to the process of shaping a tradition, a community of experience.’³ In other words, social and economic climbing for a few lucky ones had little to do with the needs of working-class people in general nor with the idea of an equally participative polity as he had conceived it: the purpose of meritocracy was ‘to sweeten the poison of hierarchy’. But why did he regard hierarchy as inherently poisonous? The anger in that phrase points it up
as an important one, in which Williams reveals something of the levelling anarchist who lurked within the moderate reforming socialist he appeared to be at the time. He is echoing the words of St. Paul in Corinthians when he pulls down the vanity of human hierarchies and suggests that people who subscribe to the authority of the earthly wisdom of oppressors deserve no more than to be slaves. God chose the humble and weak to be his congregation and overthrow the existing order, in order to demonstrate the emptiness of earthly power and the wisdom of the great. His tone is like St Paul's and his message is strikingly similar in its call for discipline, fellowship and solidarity amongst those who are struggling together for common betterment.

In other early essays Williams attempts to define what is to be valued and striven for as ‘common culture’, and in so doing he strikes out at what he perceives to be the counter-forces to such a goal in a way that reveals his impatience for much of what passed as the ‘working-class’ anger of the group of writers who had quickly won fame as ‘Angry Young Men’. John Wain had depicted an alienated working-class academic failure in *Hurry on Down* (1953); the ravings of Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* (1956) were those of someone who felt that the sufferings and ideals of the thirties had been betrayed; and the travails of Jim Dixon (played in the film by Ian Carmichael, a posh-sounding actor who enjoyed a strange career being cast against class-type as the ‘good’, aspiring working-class character) in Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* as he tries to make it as a red-brick university lecturer, expressed a new working-class predicament in the semi-feudal world of higher education. Jim Dixon is a pugnacious Northerner whose class on Henry the Fifth is subversively concerned with the role of the poor bloody infantry and who thinks little of the head of department’s view of ‘Merrie England’. In Kingsley Amis’ favour he is the first English novelist to portray a lecturer who had actually risen from the ranks—only John Wain’s contemporary *Hurry on Down*, David Storey’s *Flight into Camden*, Raymond Williams’ first novel *Border Country*, and, decades later, Willy Russell’s cloyingly sentimental *Educating Rita* and Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* (an acid portrait of a predatory corridor revolutionary) tried to bring the opening up of higher education to ordinary people into the subject-matter of British fiction. But for Raymond Williams, our Virgilian guide to these precincts of hell, any cultural phenomenon was deemed valuable only insofar as it contributed to what he called the project of common betterment:

The institutions of cynicism, of denial, and of division will perhaps only be thrown down when they are recognised for what they are: the deposits of practical failures to live. Failure—the jaunty
hardness of ‘the outsider’—will lose its present glamour, as the common experience moves in a different direction. Nobody will be proud any longer to be separate, to deny, or to ratify a personal failure in unconcern.4

But who was this ‘outsider’? Alan Sillitoe’s Saturday Night and Sunday Morning is a novel which appeared in the same year as Culture and Society; its hero, Arthur Seaton, prosperous young lathe operator, a political cynic and philanderer whose attitude to life may on the face of it seem to epitomise what Williams called ‘the jaunty hardness of the outsider’, and either to give the lie to Williams’ vision of community and solidarity, or to embody an alternative ‘ ethic’ of ‘looking after number one’. Seaton certainly talks in that familiar way, but he doesn’t himself believe in the ladder—after all, he’s only been offered a bar stool. Joe Lampton, on the other hand, the social climbing young accountant of John Braine’s Room at the Top, has swallowed ‘the ladder’ hook, line and sinker, he just knows that its would-be climbers must forget all about playing by the rules. The subject of John Braine’s Room at the Top and many other writings by the ‘Angry Young Men’ was, as I will explain, described at the time as ‘hypergamy’, a sort of English class equivalent of ‘endogamy’, marrying out of the tribe, or even of ‘miscegenation’: a pseudo-scientific term for marrying someone above your social station coined with the intention of making the day-dream of snaring a middle-class woman sound like a crime against nature. Albert, the tally-boy hero of Jack Trevor Story’s Live Now, Pay Later, is a rebel of the same kind, but lower down the social ladder: a refusenik of social mobility who deliberately failed the 11-plus to avoid the extra work of grammar school, he is nevertheless out for what he can get. Story’s tally-boys and their female customers are irresponsible to the core, gleeful consumerists, permanently on the make, or in the case of the local secretarial agency, running a perfectly respectable brothel on the side.

These novels and others like them interest me partly because they appear to contradict what socialist and liberal thinkers and commentators thought the working-classes should be and do and want, because they record dramatic changes in working-class lives and attitudes; but also because, for once, there appears to have been a close fit between the political landscape of a cultural theorist and the rapidly changing society in which he was intervening—it was a context where few people questioned that, yes, culture did actually have something to do with society and many thought it would play an important role in postwar modernisation—therefore a period when working-class people and their predicaments were at the centre of so many films, novels and plays. When the story of the outsider was needed, an insider was often hired to write it, but this is itself

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a point of interest. There are a few survivors of those times, fewer still who are still creatively active today. Sometimes they can seem like a bunch of imposters around whom a series of once potent but now exhausted myths were woven a long hopeful time ago; but that is a phenomenon in itself and worth investigation by anyone who wants to try and understand how culture works. Is it a reflector of economic power and change, a relatively autonomous construct of the yapping classes or a completely free-floating fantasy world like the flying island of disputing philosophers in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*?

_Culture and Society_ was at the time a breakthrough in the breadth of its considerations on British culture and it is still a genuinely radical book if you look at it right. What may have seemed mildly reformist to the would-be revolutionaries of the sixties and seventies can appear stirringly uncompromising to a supine present; but in later more Marx-influenced writings Raymond Williams distanced himself from his earlier formulations of ‘community’ and ‘common culture’. They had been directed against an elite definition of culture to suggest that culture was more widely produced and meant more things than in current definitions, and served as an argument for redefinition, and expansion in a new kind of higher education. It was an argument for a wider distribution of culture that also pointed to conflicts within culture. He explains his own development from that position to one in which he was drawing more attention to divisions within culture, and to factors that made it impossible to assume a ‘common culture’: ‘community’, in his usage, moved from an opposition between a definition of community as ‘fellowship’ or solidarity against competitive individualism to an awareness that ‘community’ was widely appropriated by the right in a notion of ‘national community’ founded on norms and exclusions: on the elimination or subordination of elements perceived as from outside and threatening its own definitions of community, so that the very word ‘community’ soon became part of a coercive pressure to adapt to nationalism.

Williams told his interviewers at the _New Left Review_ in 1977 that he had stopped using the word community once he realised it couldn’t be (or never was) used negatively, using a contemporary example of ‘a handful of strikers holding the community to ransom’: that is, to describe any group as a community tends to positively validate them—a community of strikers holding a handful of bosses to ransom might sound more sympathetic. In more recent years the term ‘the paedophile community’ has sometimes been used to describe internet child-porn users, partly because it exists precisely as a community—sharing values and information—but also, I believe, because the negative use of the word community is still slightly disturbing and helps in this case to bring home the unpleasantness of
what is often being shared by communities. In what may seem an extreme example, but is in fact a completely germane one where the ambivalence about community in postwar British fiction is concerned, William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932) climaxes when the black-on-the-inside outsider, Joe Christmas, is in effect collectively killed by the community of Jackson, Mississippi, as he attempts to shelter in the house of another outsider, having murdered yet another outsider; and an outsider strikes the *coup de grace* and severs his genitals. But it’s the collective assumptions of racism that kill him and a great novel about a small town in the American South reveals that solidarity isn’t always such a positive thing and that community values can mean sharing in the fond memories of the most terrible acts imaginable. At the moment of Joe Christmas’ death his black blood

...seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, not fading and not particularly fretful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant.6

For William Faulkner it’s as though this moment is the heart of this heartless community, if it has one, and that its true values lie somewhere between the pontifications of its most vocal and respectable members, the vengeful sense of historical inevitability of its most religiously obsessed, the atavistic hatreds and prurience of its silent majority, finding their truest expression in a culminating act of castration of a shifty outsider, maybe a murderer and white woman raper, which not one of them has the courage to personally carry out. And, somehow, it’s this necessary act and this symbolic sacrificial death that has guaranteed the integrity of the community’s values and transmitted them towards the future: nigger-lovers may be reluctantly tolerated, but neither they nor any resulting racial impurities will not be suffered to prosper in Jackson, Mississippi.

Raymond Williams’ first novel, *Border Country*, is a hymn to the values of his railwayman father and of the community in which he grew up. As economic history lecturer Matthew Price goes home to be at his father’s bedside after the latter’s heart attack he examines a railway map ‘with its familiar network of arteries, held in the shape of Wales, and to the east the line running out and elongating, into England. The shape of Wales: pig-headed Wales you say to remember to draw it. And no returns.’7 Stubbornness, mapping the ways of a small working-class community, and
return journeys are the subject of *Border Country*. Matthew sits beside his father's bed and notices the portraits of his grandparents that hang on his parents' bedroom wall, photographs Williams describes with a loving attention to detail: the women ‘in their high black dresses, with the brooches at their throats’, the maternal grandfather’s ‘sharp, dark, inquisitive face… intelligent and cunning from alternative sides of the bargain’ and his father’s father’s eyes ‘still with the devil in them, the spurt of feeling and gaiety.’ Matthew’s sense of solidarity with his family and his sense of the rightness of its ways and values, and also his sense of being its culmination lend great moral authority and seriousness to the opening of the book, but as the action moves away from Matthew at his father’s death-bed to a retelling of his parent’s arrival in the village and the whole of their subsequent married life, there is an obsessive accumulation of detail—which rooms lead into which in their terraced house, what the pantry was called, every nuance of family speech—which speaks of a lonely rescue operation on memory and identity, of revisited senses of things from childhood that have become attenuated. There’s also something rapturously solipsistic about the length at which Williams tells his family story that gradually overpowers his winning sense of loyalty, the attractively faithful Welsh sound of the prose, and the lore and politics of the railwaymen whose voices echo through its pages. Perhaps there is something pig-headed about the Williams who insists so much on the centrality of his family’s experience, and even more on his sense of the meaning of that experience, which undermines the novel’s ambitions to be a realist text and drags it towards a kind of sentimentalising memoir. Not that the book is without humour, far from it, and it is certainly packed with incident and acute observation, but it lacks the impartiality, the distance, and the ruthlessness a good novel should have. Like most people’s stories about their families, it’s a bit on the dull side, even the most sympathetic listener might find themselves sneaking a glance at their watch: a shame, because this also suggests that the kind of social and emotional fidelity Williams thinks novels should possess, isn’t altogether what makes them run for their historical or present readerships, which as a reader of popular fiction he was in a good position to realise.

*Border Country* is a meticulously imagined book, with a circular structure that suggests seasonal turning and timeless rhythms: Matthew Price returns to his father’s deathbed at the end of this un-novelistic novel and buries him with the community, beginning to let go, as the community itself does, placing this latest death in a collective, agreed past. It is a book of memory and solace: death must be accepted, his father’s life must end, but it goes into the weave of memory, and thus stays, and
his father’s story is subsumed into the ongoing life of the place that has nurtured him. It is both a moving and a slow-moving book, muted, precise, restrained without strongly reaching for, or achieving, strong literary effects; perfect, it is an affirmation of Williams’ communitarian politics that hits every nail squarely on the head. He feels it in the deep heart’s core: a passionate affirmation of the values of a working-class community he sees overwhelmingly as nurturing and positive. Sentimental? Maybe. It is no *Light in August* but still a powerful, unique novel.

*Border Country* relates deeply to working-class traditions, where they have been allowed to exist at all, in its sense that it is always having to be begun again, which has also been said of the African-American literary tradition, often finding its truest expression in autobiographical writings in which the writer has the impression of painfully finding a voice and standing at the beginning of something new. For the middle-class cultural critic or novelist the sense of a written tradition is far stronger, and the working-classes are more likely to be examined as an index of what is wrong with society, as evidence of a decline in standards, as an object in social analysis, as a source of anxieties about ‘where we are heading’ than permitted to speak for themselves, if this is deemed possible at all. Such a genuine working-class recalling subject is relatively rare in the supposed upper echelons of English literature, and its first task is always to explain itself to an all-knowing middle-class expert on its condition. Having said this, these are traditions in English socialism and liberalism that were sympathetic and attempted to contribute to the betterment of the working-classes. If they hadn’t existed, would we have all become clever enough to do their jobs and speak for ourselves? This is a question Alan Sillitoe’s Arthur Seaton might well have framed, but it is unlikely ever to be properly answered now.

In our wider culture ‘realism’ is still used as a short-hand for ‘telling of reality’ and particularly associated with ‘telling working-class experience’, but the conflation of the two modes—realism has an over-arching world-view in which it places its particular lives and naturalism is concerned mainly with accuracies of surface, whether these are those of upper bourgeois life in crisis in Chekhov or those of the politicised slum-dwellers in Zola—misses something important. Hollywood film is not realist in tendency; it is full of highly symbolic narratives, but is often naturalistic. When at the turn of the last century the American novelist and critic, W.D. Howells, lambasted the sentimentality of popular taste and passionately argued for the socially reforming work of American realists as against ‘romanticistic’ novelists, he also included the great American allegorists of the nineteenth century out
of his conception of the novel, along with Dickens and everyone else who wrote mainly ‘for effects’ rather than truth to experience. For Howells (and in a way he could remind us of sixties experimental writer B.S. Johnson in this) fiction writers were largely retailers of falsehoods: ‘I make truth the prime test of a novel,’ he declared. ‘If I do not find that it is like life, then it does not exist for me as art; it is ugly, it is ludicrous, it is impossible.’

But it was Howells’ own task that proved impossible as the history of 20th century American culture unfolded. Hollywood movies are in general as allegorical as any story by Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Bret Harte or Mark Twain; but even when this isn't explicitly the case, when films are reaching for a kind of naturalism inherent in a medium based on photography, the symmetries of allegorical melodrama have tended to turn everything into the Pilgrims’ Progress. Naturalism plus melodrama translated into an early Hollywood in which landlords were always rapacious, priests were invariably hypocrites and the rocky path of love was rocky indeed—so far so good—but was always trodden with ultimate success by lovers who clasped one another under the bower as the last frames shuddered in sympathy and they were seen as if through a closing shutter, an eye closing in blissful satisfaction at the finality of their brief bursting embrace: this is still the ending film audiences will most easily tolerate. Films may have become more morally complex, and Howells may be right that this is in direct proportion to their realism about social conditions, but they are still shaped by the deep strain of sentimental allegory in American fictions.

All this is of relevance to postwar British fiction because for the first time novelists were writing in a context in which, although many thirties writers had been touched by it, American literary and film culture had a very wide currency. Since Raymond Williams last ditch appeals for a realism latter-day proponents of allegory have been in the ascendant; distinctions between ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’ are sometimes lost and realism itself is usually seen by professional critics as an ensemble of codes and conventions—worn out ones at that—as bearers of symbolic representations that should be questioned as figurations of real social experience, largely because of the very persuasiveness of their direct truth claims: the novels of Gillian Freeman, as we will see, are persuasively pellucid, reports from the front lines of domestic class war, although they are not particularly ‘authentic’. But need we reject Williams’ idea of representation altogether? Can’t we somehow simply ‘demand’ that representations be mandated and criticise them in Howells’ light: hold them to account for their supposed truth to experience? Perhaps we do this already: it is part of being a reader and we don’t need to have many conceptions or art, realist or otherwise, in order to do it.
Howells, who delivered the essay I have quoted from on the commercial lecture circuit, tells the story of a young woman who praised him for having remembered all the things in his novels, as though he had not invented them, which he admits he had. It might be possible to demand mandated representations from writers of contemporary fiction if they really did represent, or make present, their real spontaneous social experience rather than recycling the definitions of sociology (whether overlaid with Marxist definitions of social class or not), playing to markets for writing and their various controllers and constituencies, and by partaking of the nebulously defined state of cultural play manifesting itself in the agendas and atmospheres nurtured by different governments and the public language of the moment, or simply all the happy recycled approximations of history and national character that float around, half-discredited phrases, in flux beneath all this stuff—a nation of shopkeepers, ‘imperial nostalgia’, ‘a feudal infrastructure’. Language considered ill-fitting to the new interest groups who must continue to deploy it in order to be heard in our contested consensual cultural polity, which is more likely to be driven by market forces than by the notion that any particular group should be given a fair shake of the stick.

These senses of things are a kind of logos or imaginative pool into which anyone might be expected to try and dip their cup, and may therefore be easily seen as modes in writing only, and in practice they represent places on the back benches of culture for which there is powerful social competition. In other words, it is impossible for writing to be ‘democratic’, ‘representative’, or indeed a socially and historically reliable account of anything in our historical moment, and realism’s fading claims were therefore always false. Novelists can neither be mandated nor made subject to recall, whether instant or otherwise. ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant,’ wrote Emily Dickinson. ‘Success in circuit lies.’ She seems to know cunning and indirection are essential tools if the truly marginal social experience is to be articulated, and might be heard, even if sometime in the far future. My own approach to these questions stems from a hard-to-shift belief that novels, many novels, do indeed contain such slanted truths and if the worlds and conceptions of those worlds revealed in their scrabbled or artful pages is an inherently partial and hemmed around kind of truth, it still comes through to the right kind of attention however slant the novelist may be trying to tell it. W.D. Howells, in his own novels and his proselytising for the great Western realist short story writer Hamlin Garland, was indeed a radical writing against the grain of his society.

The category of experience—which names something that is both immediate and typical, close and far away—appeals to ‘direct knowledge’,
but in some very different senses: we might say ‘she’s an experienced liar’ or ‘such is the experience of the working-class’, and mean in the first case merely that there is a precedent for her lying, and in the second be referring to a certain historical kind of knowledge, yet when we seek ‘experiences’ it is their immediacy that is imagined as gratifying. ‘Experience’ has both a supreme cultural authority, that takes precedence over book learning, or other kinds of knowledge, but it is also most insecure and open to question—one is trapped in, or by, ones experience—‘that’s just your experience, mine’s different.’ Experience is both particular and ineffable, concrete and hard to pin down; it is the very stuff of life, but it is not in itself seen as valuable. The truths of experience may have been hard won and incontrovertible to those who have acquired them, but they are worth little to those who don’t share in the same circumstances or point of view. This authority (and insecurity) is what enables realist novels to be written, often what motivates them, and also what makes them vulnerable to subsequent identification as particular, partial, or wrong in the light of other ‘experiences’. We want to know how the other half lives, but having experienced it vicariously are unlikely to surrender much of our own previous sense of things. For in reading from and for ‘experience’ (as much as in writing from it) we are particularly likely to reproduce unexamined attitudes and assumptions towards characters and their worlds, to read in ‘stereotypes’ and in attempting to encompass uncharted experience revert to the same timeworn ways of looking at things. It’s just the same for the writers of realist fiction, except that they needed far more commitment, as well as an eye to the double-game of satisfying more than one constituency, to see their inventions into print.

When Enoch Powell made his infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in response to the introduction of a race relations act outlawing discrimination against immigrants, it was in a context where what was to become ‘multiculturalism’ was already being mooted by the Labour Party: that immigrants should be accepted not on the condition of total integration into British ways of life, but as an element of cultural diversity. For Williams, writing in a context of British working-class politics, ideas of community and solidarity remained essential; they just needed to be redefined in order to continue to be useful. Once a particular definition of community became dominant, he argued, and any variants were subordinated, then the value he saw in solidarity turned in an opposite direction: ‘The whole notion of the common and community is precisely what all this work has been analysing. So, if one says, does the use of this idea create problems… it isn’t
a matter of defining the problem; this is what the analysis has been about. Certainly, the project is something “common” in that sense, something in the sense of a shared culture includes diversity.”12 But this idea of diversity within commonness is one that will bear a bit of further examination. An opening up of formerly elite definitions of culture was certainly a priority of the British cultural left in the fifties, and in this senses it was a period in which the terms of a new ‘diversity’ were beginning to be defined. One problem that a notion of ‘diversity within commonness’ ran into is that such diversity isn’t necessarily, and cannot altogether be described in terms of, a freely-associated harmonious plurality and richness, but must—always does, anyway—include conflict, antagonism, mutual exclusion, fierce competition, and an all-important power to define what its parameters should be.

The political sense of the desirability of ‘diversity within commonness’ that was beginning to emerge in the fifties and was consolidated and extended in the sixties was one that usually wished away conflict, that fudged uncomfortable realities while promising to repair social inequalities and divisions. Most importantly it was—and is—a consensual model: inclusion as an element in diversity is always on the terms of acquiescence to a shared notion of culture in which difference is possible only where ranged around a defining class authority (that’s if you get to be included at all): in Britain middle-class mores and values and aspirations were and are the centrally defining ones, and, as Powell pointed out, these were far more sympathetic to new British communities of immigrants than to the native working-class, particularly after Powell’s speech. Invoking a threat to white women, with references to ‘excreta’ being pushed through the letterbox of one of his elderly Wolverhampton constituents and to ‘grinning piccaninnies’, had stirred up working-class protests in his favour. Even when expressed in far more moderate and reasonable terms, everyday views found amongst the British working-classes, whether socialist or conservative, simply did not fall within the terms of any liberal consensus. Inclusion was always inevitably at the cost of a heavy distortion of what was to be represented, and Williams’ discussion of ‘representation’ makes much of a contrast between the meanings ‘to symbolise’ and ‘to make present’ which he finds latent in the word ‘representation’. This he traces in controversies about political representation, particularly the claims of representative democracy and the question of whether representatives speak ‘in the name of’ those they stand for, or are to be merely taken to be ‘typical’ of them. In either case they stand in the place of the constituents themselves. Williams believes that representatives and representations should be somehow mandated and potentially recallable like Trades Union
delegates, shop stewards, the officers of a tenant’s association, the kinds of recallable parliaments envisioned by Gerard Winstanley or Thomas Paine, in the Soviet ideal of local and work-place assemblies, or indeed in any other vision of a direct, flexible democracy. He traces a similar history in aesthetic uses of representation, where the meanings of ‘symbol’ and ‘reproduction’ are also both in play in a series of historical transactions between Realism and Naturalism. Williams makes this hinge on the contrasting meanings and difference between ‘representational’ and ‘representative’ art. The former reproduces surfaces, observed forms; the latter deals in types or ‘ideas’ or symbols. In both cases, political and aesthetic, there is a cleavage, which is to say both a sharp distinction and a connection, in the word ‘representation’ between the ideas of a group speaking for themselves and a group spoken for, or pictured in a certain light, whether by politicians or artists.13 This is no longer a remotely fashionable view of representation; but, half a century later, we are seeing the frightening electoral emergence of a right-wing populist party, isolationist and anti-immigrant, which claims to speak for the misrepresented working-classes.

II

The Good Old Working-class and the Bad New Working-class

Do enough research and you could probably track down a quote from King Harold to the effect that ‘ye peasants are not what they were in my young day’ shortly before he got it in the eye on Hastings beach. A contrast is often drawn between the communitarian ways and values of an old working-class that is being supplanted by the rapaciousness, anomie and thuggishness of a newly affluent one is a theme in British culture that can easily be traced back to the industrial revolution but probably made its first appearance long before.14 It’s there underlying all forms of golden ageism of left or right: William Morris’ vision of unalienated labour in the middle-ages, Edward Thomas’ celebration of the elusive ‘Lob’, Yeats’ disdain for the money-obsessed shopkeeping classes as opposed to the story-keeping peasants of yore and his amiable fantasy of turning them all into busy-bees in his personal honey factory, Ezra Pound’s denunciations of ‘usura’ and Vita Sackville-West’s hymns to old ways in poems like ‘The Land’ and ‘A Saxon Song’15 as well as in F.R. Leavis’ contrast between an old rural culture of ‘experience’ supplanted by a degraded commercial culture; his ideal artist, D.H. Lawrence, lauds aristocratic virtues over democratic ones
(there are no such things so far as he is concerned) and is more likely to see a peasant-like stolidity in his Nottingham miners—he has too much first-hand experience to idealise them—than to see in them the potential vanguard of a revolutionary working-class. Indeed, his saving grace is that in his poetry he thinks they should repudiate work altogether. When he is not lamenting the dumbing down that further democratisation of cultural life will inevitably bring he hankers after believing in aristocracy for everyone.

But nothing could illustrate the difficulties and paradoxes of D.H. Lawrence’s view of the class he had come from, nor why critics of Leavis’ stamp could so readily accept a radical working-class writer, better than the chapter in *Women in Love* when one its pairs of lovers, Birkin and Ursula, visit a Nottingham street market, buy a pretty chair they quickly decide they don’t want, and attempt to give it away to a young couple who are also browsing. Experiencing the travails of many a would-be philanthropist, Birkin and Ursula find the couple distrustful of this sudden bounty. The young woman wonders why they are giving it away: if it’s not good enough for them why should she and her husband-to-be be satisfied with their cast-off? Lawrence describes the couple with fascinated disgust—the woman is blowsy, heavy with child, the man insolent, leering and sexually magnetic: a rangy, slimy little rat. It’s clear they have no aesthetic appreciation of the chair, they are unable to see any intrinsic value in it and find Birkin and Ursula’s act of spontaneous generosity incomprehensible. But they are attractively unselfconscious, self-defining characters whose autonomy is dented a little by their acceptance of Birkin and Ursula’s wedding gift. Lawrence closes the scene with Birkin’s doom-laden prognostications on democracy: it is common rats such as these who will inherit the future when people like Ursula and himself, appreciators of high culture, life’s natural aristocrats, are forced to hide in chinks and corners and live on society’s leavings.\textsuperscript{16} This couple walking away with such carelessness, carrying the pretty chair in such a way that Rupert Birkin fears they may destroy or discard it without a thought—are in effect the bad new working-class in waiting. They are the ignorant spawn of the base beds of democracy: great-grandparents to Harry Enfield’s Wayne and Waynetta and all the stereotyped media offerings of the chavs of Basildon and Ipswich and Chelmsford.

A strong element of nostalgia—usually combined with disdain for a degraded present—has very often found its way into leftist accounts of the working-classes. Indeed, it seems always to have been there, and may be understood partly by looking at the origins of such thinking, partly by the social complexion of its proponents, and partly by a generally
backward looking ‘structure of feeling’ (to use Williams’ term for a popular ideology) that is rightly said to pervade English culture. At the same time there is a rich literature of dealing with the lives of ordinary people, including the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century, the writings of historians like A.L. Morton, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson, socialist commentators like George Orwell (about whose paralysing effect on the postwar left Amis is astute), and earlier (perennially neglected) working-class novelists like Arthur Morrison, Alexander Baron, James Hanley, Jim Phelan and Jack Common, and left-leaning middle-class low-life writers with connections to bohemian Soho like James Curtis and Patrick Hamilton—all those writers whom Hanley refers to in his essay ‘Don Quixote Drowned’ as ‘a peculiar flight of proletarian duck’ which alighted briefly in the thirties: rarely acknowledged predecessors of some of the sixties novelists whom I shall be examining in this study. James Hanley is probably, with Hamilton, the most prolific, ambitious and interesting of the novelists of the thirties; but although these two writers continued to produce fiction during the sixties, their time had gone, to paraphrase Hanley, and a writer like James Curtis, silent since his heyday, articulated more of the glamour and violence associated with the bad new working-class, or the criminal classes, and in his attempt to develop a ‘working-class’ fiction in a popular fictional form seems closer to some of the sixties writers than most of his contemporaries.

Raymond Williams has a more agile and sympathetic take on modernity than most cultural commentators. Nothing could be more clearly-sightedly democratic than his early essays ‘Culture is Ordinary’ and ‘The Idea of a Common Culture’, where he declares that working-class people don’t want to be middle-class, they simply want what more affluent people have; but some of his immediate followers fell straight into the same old sub-Lawrentian formulas, most strikingly and crudely Richard Hoggart in his influential book *The Uses of Literacy*, where newly affluent working-class consumers are described quite luridly as the bovine masses, ‘their faces bloated by cheap confectionary’ as they listen to their music with ‘the hollow cosmos effect’ (early audience shots in *Oh Boy!* and *Top of the Pops?*) and unfavourably compared with the whippet and pigeon fancying denizens of real Northern working-class communities or the female factory hands who had heroically got up at dawn to participate in Shakespeare reading groups before clocking-on for their twelve hour shifts in the mills. It was attitudes like these that Kingsley Amis was pointing to in his ‘Angry Young Man’ essay about ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals’. With no Spain, no Ethiopia and no mass employment of the thirties around which to focus their dissent, many intellectuals turned to the right and those on the left turned nostalgic-romantic and lost touch with the grass-roots
of the Labour Party, which was anyway pragmatic and managerial and compromised by its foreign policy in the service of a failing, fading British imperialism:

Everyone, from Dr Leavis at Cambridge to Mr Priestley in Reynolds News is saying that our values are perishing before the New Barbarism—which used to mean Hitlerism, but now it means the Welfare State and commercial television (...) It was all very well to press for higher working-class wages in the old days, but now that wages have risen the picture is less attractive; why, some of them are actually better off than we are ourselves. We never contemplated that. And now the Labour Party have the confounded cheek to press for more equality still. They are out to make everyone the same, you see. Levelling down.18

If I were to set up another polarity in accounts of the working-classes in British cultural writings to apply and return to in my readings of postwar fictions, it might be to draw a contrast between the anthropological and the sociological as approaches to working-class life. It might be objected that these often amount to much the same thing. But in general the sociological approach is improving and tends to focus on the impact of modernity and social change on the working-classes; it is functionalist in flavour and directed towards seeing the role of the working-class role within capitalism, whether to make conditions more humane or to make workers more efficient. Mass Observation most famously exemplifies the anthropological approach: the habits and ways of living of the people are documented in a non-critical way, as elements of tribal tradition, as though they were unchanging. Sometimes patronisingly, sometimes not, they are accorded a certain value in themselves, much as the coming of age rituals of the Samoans or the tribal customs of what were collectively known as ‘Bantu’ peoples by field-working anthropologists. Sociology tends to be urban, anthropology rural. Sociology attempts to reform and is concerned with adaptation; anthropology is looking for the old ways, the untouched past, and is interested in preservation. Anthropology has a universalising tendency with its generalisations about the primitive mind and its discovery of trans-cultural linguistic and narrative patterns as in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Sociology is generally concerned with the workings of particular societies at particular moments, in particular times of cathartic development such as those that gave birth to it. Auguste Compte’s early 19th century Positivism is usually taken as modern sociology’s main starting point, but as the social sciences developed a contest of theories of society became its main preoccupation as an academic discipline. Karl Marx versus Max Weber, post-modern Economies of Signs and Space versus ‘third way’
sociologist Anthony Giddens’ (influential on New Labour) ideas about the re-embedding of traditional practices within a compelling modernity.19

Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) is a classic sociological study of an urban working-class community, that of Bethnal Green, poised between old and new ways of living. On the one hand everyone knows one another, kinship ties are close and supportive; more negatively girls passing the 11-plus and going to grammar school are regarded by their contemporaries as outsiders, traitors, stuck up, and are painfully ostracised. A passionate plea is being made on behalf of the traditional values of a three-generation community of ‘turnings’ and ‘back-doubles’20 but the process of moving out into new high rise housing and council estates in Essex is an unstoppable one. However immutable the ways of life of the working-class East End might seem, they are coming to an end, and for some members of the younger generation the dispersal of traditional values this entails might not be altogether a bad thing. It’s fantastically useful, if you are a young working mother, to have your old mum on hand to mind the kids. On the other hand her ways of nurturing might be shockingly harsh and inappropriate to the modern world, as might be many of the values she tries to pass on—like many younger generations, and like their contemporaries in the middle-class, young adults coming of age in the late fifties East End may well have felt that the past was better forgotten.

We might be tempted to ask of novelists who write on the working-class whether they are sociologists or anthropologists, but it is a distinction that tends to break down since so many are a little of both and neither. Dickens for example would be an anthropologist in the way he so lovingly documents the speech and manners of his working-class characters; their patterns of life and basic character is as unchanging and unchangeable as the repeated tics of speech and thought by which they announce themselves. But in his unmatched reforming zeal, as a crusader, and as he records the impact of city life on them he is a radical sociologist. Raymond Williams finds something unique to modern city life in the flaring vividness of Dickens’ character sketches, his urban types. Italian critic Franco Moretti finds Dickens’ outlook to be an underlyingly feudal one in which a person’s social place is taken to be utterly fixed unless, like Pip in *Great Expectations*, you are lucky enough to have a mysterious benefactor, an escaping convict you once tried to help, to buy you a place in the legal profession: unless, that is, you are the beneficiary of the sort of miracle without which the action of such novels of vertiginous upward mobility can’t begin in nineteenth century England. Moretti contrasts *Great Expectations* with Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir*, whose upwardly mobile Julien Sorel rises purely by ability
and cunning. But who can say who is the social realist and who is the mythmaker: England’s revered purveyor of fantastic coincidences or the European believer in a possible way up in the world for a young man of peasant stock with abilities? Sorel has only to look up from the gutter to be offered two professions; Pip is lucky, but he has to prove his own worth by the end of the novel, in order to win Estella, who would never have married him if she had been who she thought she was and not the daughter of Abel Magwitch: both their illusions and their expectations are the helpful sport of an escaped convict, his lawyer and a mad rich old snobbish woman, all of whom know the ways of the world, and they find out their true destiny despite the latter’s dusty charades, which burn and blow away in the sunny breeze of fulfilled love in the novel’s final pages, when Pip finally has the authority to rescue her from the mantle of crispy Miss Havisham. By this act Pip inherits Magwitch’s wealth after all; but does he tell her about her real living mother, the murderess who is Jaggers’ servant? We are never told.

But the kind of magical coincidence out of which romances are made isn’t unique to the English popular novel, nor did it die out in the nineteenth century. Near the beginning of Faulkner’s The Wild Palms, a book which is composed of a pair of intertwining novellas of Southern high and low life, there is a celebrated incident where the impoverished law student protagonist suddenly, miraculously finds a wallet full of money in a sidewalk trash can. This fortuitous event occurs a few moments after the restless artistic wife of a wealthy New Orleans businessman has expressed her interest in him: it is an implausible moment of contingency about which sensible readers of Faulkner have bitterly complained, but it is not without a certain instructive value about the underwhelming likelihood of romance without finance. It’s a nuisance, as Slim Gaillard sang, but it just don’t make sense. And social novels don’t necessarily make that much sense either, at least not that which is most loudly claimed for them in the never had it so good white heat of their moment.

Fifties British fiction is often about social mobility and, along with its sixties development, it is often also about what I have called ‘the bad new working-class’, but it seldom asks why they were like that, and what (if anything) is to be done about this. It is, by and large, content to record and sympathize on various terms and tends to justify and even to celebrate what might be seen as anti-social attitudes. Nell Dunn makes rebellious young working-class women into heroines of matriarchy and Lynn Reid Banks celebrates a new female consciousness. Other writers, John Berger and Raymond Williams for example, suggest some sort of remaking of collective traditions is needed—a communitarian movement towards
socialism, or other connections with what is seen as a wider historical movement. Social mobility itself is most often explored in a negative way, while writers whose terms of reference are rooted in a working-class ‘as it is’ celebrate work dodging and fantasy in a humorous vein. This is true both of Samuel Selvon—although his is a different ‘new working-class’ of West Indian immigrants—and Essex’s Jack Trevor Story. Story and Lancashire’s Bill Naughton both create ‘new’ roguish folk heroes. Another kind of writer taking bearings from the period of Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider* and the Angry Young Men, psychoanalyses them as artist-heroes, as versions of himself. In different ways this is true of B.S. Johnson, Alexander Trocchi, and Paul Ableman, whose first novel, *I Hear Voices*, creatively explores the world of the schizophrenic. The outsider—who is not seen to enjoy a ‘jaunty hardness’ although he is often a failure—is still quite likely to be celebrated in these books as someone who is kicking against the pricks or bucking his or her allotted place in society; but there are always, as Samuel Beckett said, more pricks than kicks, and in real life it tends to be the pricks who do the kicking.

British social realism has certainly had a hard time critically in the past few decades. Claims to show ‘real life’, to ‘tell it like it is’, or was, have been gleefully demolished, deconstructed by cultural theorists, gleefully revealed as ideologically driven ‘representations’, discursive constructs, saying the opposite of what might be supposed, failing to address a wider world in which they are enmeshed and victimising those it would seek to celebrate. Its legacy, in the nineteen eighties, turned into what were characterised as a series of increasingly dreary and repetitive indictments of ‘Thatcher’s Britain’, as aesthetically conservative and politically played out as market forces and the concomitant politics of consumption and desire were dynamic and forward looking. A political and aesthetic style that reminded fashionable Londoners uncomfortably of what was happening elsewhere (since our sense of the working-class North, and of Northerners as automatically ‘working-class’ derived in large part from films about it); on the plus side the black-and-white early sixties were recycled as poetic miserablist bedsit style by The Smiths, and more negatively were parodied as ‘it’s rough up north’ by Harry Enfield, and it seemed for a while that the people, ways of life, ‘structures of feeling’ that such films alluded to could never again be referred to without irony, without quotation marks, without, finally, succumbing to an omnipresent anxiety about identifying with the losers in these struggles.

On a political level I want to argue that late fifties and early sixties British fictions such as Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Lynne Reid Banks’ *The
L-Shaped Room and Nell Dunn’s Up the Junction and Poor Cow, were in themselves the beginnings of a politics of representations that continues to dominate both our academic and especially our mainstream media culture, and that, by analysing how specifically this is the case, we can reveal much about the current state of play in the circulation of such cultural meanings: culture’s claims to be multi-vocal, to represent ‘us’ in our diversity may fall apart more easily if we look at their clumsy beginnings. The study of the sixties is important because paradigms established then still inform British cultural life. On one hand there is a legacy of sixties political movements, their commentators and theorists, and the influence they have exerted on the liberal intelligentsia, on the other the negativised, demonised sixties of the right: its woolly liberalism, social experimentation, looney leftism, false egalitarianism, the social consequences of the sexual revolution, the rise of welfarism and ‘the dependency culture’. These two versions of the sixties mirror one another, are recognisable in one another. In addition, there is the by now perennial status of the sixties as revolutionary golden age in the eyes of the young as well as some people who were actually there. This started, arguably, in about 1969 or 1970, about the time that John Lennon crooned wistfully that ‘the dream is over’; but the sixties was and has remained an indefatigably self-mythologising period, the first to refer to itself, typically, as ‘the sixties’, the first ‘post-modern’ period, or ‘period’: the moment when ‘periodisation’—the construction and enforcement of time periods in terms of style decades emerged to an obsessive degree (‘the twenties’, ‘the thirties’, ‘the seventies’, ‘the eighties’) in the making of modern mass ‘history’, although it is equally arguable that nothing much was invented in the sixties unless it was an attempt to escape from the exigencies of social being and mundane time-consciousness by chemical means.

For many such interest groups (or ‘interpretive communities’ as Benedict Anderson has called them23) the sixties is a mythical point-of-origin for what they love or hate. The sixties as we know them politically is their collective invention, albeit a continually contested one. But what was invented in that decade? What is contested? And is it all a myth? I will argue that one of the crucial inventions of the sixties, emerging from the social agendas of the left in the fifties, was a politics of representations, and a genuine attempt to map new social territories in new ways, and that this is why it is our most contested and obsessively rewritten decade. The structuralist-influenced Marxism of the 1970s produced a critique of what had become known as the ‘Culture and Society’ tradition based on enthusiastic importations from European Marxist thinkers, but whatever its overall intellectual validity constituted in effect a withdrawal...
from the radical cultural interventionist tendency of Williams to a more purely institutional focus, and it was there, in universities, in the space that Williams had helped to open up, that it survived until its thinkers and political agendas were first marginalised and then swept away by the Thatcher decade. The nineties and the early twenty-first century have seen the beginnings of some refiguration of accounts of British history and literature in terms of postmodern critical vocabularies, and all but a few specialists have forgotten Raymond Williams, a seemingly moderate figure whose ideas still carry a radical charge after five decades. But now might also be a good time to re-evaluate Williams’ work, re-examine its project of social equity and to ask if his approach still has anything to say to us in the early twenty-first century.

In British society there are ways of life that involved and continue to involve millions of people yet which remain relatively marginal in our culture, appearing only in novels of the fifties and sixties working-class fashion moment and a number of haunting films of the same period, then popping out of existence forever, or at least until the next retrospective. The moment they appeared in remains an important one, and could be presented as a lost golden age, because of the sympathy, dignity and centrality working-class people were accorded in these fictions. These films and to a lesser extent novels are remembered with such affection because in them working-class experience was accorded an importance that it always had and of course still does for people who are actually living it, although whether or not many of us wish to consume representations of ourselves in leisure hours is a moot point, especially now that we can all be authors of self-produced self representations.

Many of the books I will discuss have an intimate connection with the films and television of their era; a large number of them were filmed, many were made to be filmed—that was their authors’ hope—and in this sense they are very much part of the film moment of the British fifties and sixties. Bill Naughton’s short story, ‘Late Night on Watling Street’, for example, could easily have been made into a two-fisted trucker (or lorry-driver) film like Hell Drivers, which starred Stanley Baker, perhaps the ultimate intimidating working-class actor of the period. Unfortunately, it’s not quite two-fisted enough. But this book isn’t about British films, or plays, or TV, or songs, or poetry—it is primarily a book about novels and short stories, because I believe it is in these that counter-stories, counter-myths are told, and here that the true preoccupations of the period appear most freely—more can be tucked between the pages of a cheap paperback than the committees who decide what will be a commercial film, or is good enough for the nation to be nationally broadcast, will ever
countenance, and in novels the rough edges haven’t yet been rounded off experience. Not many of the books I will discuss are mainstream novels by the most critically respected writers of the period. Some are written in a realist vein, or in a mode I call poetic naturalism; others counter the claims of realism to tell satisfying truths or produce satisfying modern art, go back to modernism, import from the European novel, attempt to invent new forms of their own—or create new forms of speculative fiction by employing and transforming popular fictional forms: science fiction and swords and sorcery.
Chapter One

SCARY MONSTERS AND SUPER CREEPS: 
ALAN SILLITOE AND THE ANGRY YOUNG MEN

‘Angry Young Men’ is an appellation often disparaged, and often repudiated by those to whom it was applied, and those so-labelled have in turn been dismissed by many others as an invention of journalism, as a group of apostates or class imposters remote from the social group they supposedly represented, as well as for being miserablists and aesthetic conservatives. Nevertheless, they had a giant impact on postwar English writing. They emerged in the early fifties with a supposed left-wing agenda and a claim to be sweeping away the cant of middle-class English society. They were soon to become a new establishment of their own—and were roundly despised for it by many sixties upstarts. Less glamorous than the Beats and offering little in the way of spiritual uplightings, adventurous sight-seeing or revolutionary hopes, they nevertheless had a giant impact on the flavour of English fiction and poetry in the decade that followed and in which, of course, they were still active as the bad guys. They opened the way for a wave of writers on working-class subjects, for women writers, and, more reactively, for a wave of poets who took their bearings from American modernism, and for a group of innovative, serious minded SF writers who found them limited and parochial, and a few experimental novelists and poets who felt the much same way about their obsession with class. These negative views of the Angry Young Men are not without validity and should not be too lightly dismissed.

Read at a historical distance they are mostly good writers—particularly in the writings by which they were first defined. The name was taken from Leslie Paul’s Angry Young Man (1951), a book about left-wing youth in the thirties; but the main figures have usually been taken to be Kingsley Amis, John Braine, John Osborne, John Wain, Colin Wilson, autobiographer George Scott—and a few others, including theatre and later film director Lindsay Anderson, novelist David Storey, as well as the poets known as ‘The Movement’. Many of the novelists in this study began writing in a context supplied by the Angries. One of these was Alan Sillitoe, a Nottinghamshire writer who had left school at fourteen to do factory work, and who began publishing towards the end of the fifties.

An indication of how fine a writer is Alan Sillitoe may be seen in how little plot he needed to contrive in order make Arthur Seaton’s perambulations around a few Nottingham pubs and a few willing women